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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the symptoms and ways of coping with chronic stress and briefly discusses effects of job related stress on school principals. Although stress is a normal condition, the symptoms should be identified. Under long-term stress individuals may experience six types of reactions, such as feelings of fatique and difficulty sleeping. School principals, who spend many hours daily dealing with individuals' problems, are exposed to considerable stress. Five factors are integral to coping with stress: control, success, satisfaction, support, and variety. These factors and other coping mechanisms are given practical application in narrative discussion. (CJH)

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PRINCIPAL STRESS*

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PRINCIPAL STRESS

Broadly defined, stress can result from any event which requires a reaction on our part. These events may range from very mild ones, such as the urge to find a snack when we are hungry, to devastating ones, such as having our home burn. No one avoids stress completely. It is a normal human condition. There is some evidence that dealing with occasional low level stresses may even condition us for coping with major stresses later.

Under stress physical changes take place which are similar to those which prepare our bodies for "fight or flight." If we are under stress - even low levels of stress - for prolonged periods, we are at increased risk for physical and emotional problems.

How may we recognize the signs of stress in ourselves and others? Symptoms of chronic stress are like those of depression and like "burnout" as described by (Hall, et al, 1979). Under long-term stress individuals may:

1) Experience feelings of exhaustion or fatigue. They may find it harder and harder to get out of bed in the mornings, harder to tackle difficult aspects of their jobs.

2) They may have more frequent physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach and back aches.

3) Like individuals who are depressed, they may have trouble sleeping - either sleeping too much or finding it difficult to sleep.

4) Under stress they may lose much of their zest for living. Activities which used to be fun may no longer appeal to them.

5) Those under chronic stress may be quick to react in anger, and have a low tolerance for frustration.

6) Finally, although they may be working long hours, they may accomplish little.

Keep in mind that most of us experience mild forms of these symptoms at one time of another. There is need for concern only when the symptoms are severe or last for long periods.

Stress also effects job performance. Individuals under stress may be absent more often and change jobs more frequently. They may withdraw from the students as well as from their colleagues. In some cases they may use cynicism as a defense and blame "the system" or "the kids" for any problems which arise. Most of us experience periods of being disenchanted with our work. Individuals who endure chronic stress are likely to become "burned out." Principals who have experienced burnout are the ones who have gone from real anticipation about getting to school to lying in bed praying it snowed enough over night so they won't have to go. Principals who have burned out may start in October counting the days till school is out, or begin when they are 40 counting the years till retirement. Burnout is a form of emotional exhaustion under stress. Educators in general, and principals in particular, do work which can be highly stressful. Principals spend many hours each day dealing with other people and their problems. This is stress producing. To further complicate things, when the principal gets home their own family is likely to make demands on their time and energy which are very similar to those they faced all day at school. In my experience, some of the principals who care the most about their work are among those at highest risk of falling victim of stress/burnout, because they have set very high goals for themselves.

If we agree that principals are exposed to considerable stress

we must next ask "What can be done to avoid, reduce, or otherwise deal with that stress. Pam Proctor (1979) described how Hans Selye felt there were three key factors to coping with stress:

1. CONTROL: The more control we are able to exercise over when and where we will confront stresses in our lives the more likely we are to handle it successfully.

2. SUCCESS: "There's an anti-stress affect in sucess." Being successful at what we do blocks stress in many ways. It assures us support at times. A period of stress which leads to a successful outcome is easier to deal with than the same amount of success ending in failure.

3. SATISFACTION: The feeling that our work is important also insulates us from stress.

To Selye's list I will add two of my own stress reducers:

4. SUPPORT: Support from family,friends, and co-workers can reduce the stress and help us cope with that which remains.

5. VARIETY: Too much variety (change) is stressful, but too little induces tedium. Having a comfortable amount of variety in our lives increases our opportunities for success and gives us some place to escape to when other areas are temporarily too stressful.

There are a number of other ways we can reduce stress in our lives. Some of the following ideas are my own, but many were shared with me by other educators in workshops like this one when I asked them to tell about their own favorite ways of dealing with stress. Some of these suggestions will not fit your personal style. If you are experiencing more stress than is comfortable right now I suggest you try one or two of the ideas from the list.

1. Make it your goal to have some part of each day in which you have some fun. If the pressure of preparing a budget is getting you down, it will be good to anticipate the story you are going to read to the kindergarten class, the walk you will take at recess, or the movie you and your spouse will see after school. If your plan for the day doesn't have some fun in it - then schedule some for yourself. Fun covers a multitude of stressors.

2. Many of us tend to dwell on our mistakes, on the times we screwed up, messed up, made poor decision. If you can learn something from a mistake then go ahead and examine it. But don't neglect your successes. They deserve at least equal time. Consider keeping a "Success Diary," and reviewing from time to time the occasions which you have accomplished your goals and been successful.

3. Set realistic goals for yourself. A "Winner" is someone who sets a goal and reaches it. A good teacher would not consider setting a task for a student at which he was bound to fail. A wise principal selects goals for which there are good chances of success and works toward them. When the gap between what we expect of ourselves and what we actually accomplish is wide it is difficult to feel any sense of success.

4. Build a system of support among your fellow principals or with your faculty. Arrange opportunities for displaying your positive regard for others (and theirs for you). Find a supportive colleague of group of colleagues that you can brag to about your successes and commiserate with about your disappointments. In my experience, the schools with the best morale, and least stress, are those in which there are many opportunities for principal and faculty members to support each other. Events such as lunch time potlucks,

break time birthday celebrations, "Secret Pal" gift exchanges, etc., promote the spirit of mutual support. One school I consult to has a special "Good News" bulletin board on which all are encouraged to "brag a little" about their successes or those of their colleagues.

5. Sometimes even a few minutes respite from stress makes the difference between handling it well and handling it poorly. I suggest you have a haven to which you can retreat and regroup before plunging back into the fray. This haven can be a real place like behind the closed door of your office; talking sports with the janitor; exchanging stories about your kids with the school secretary; or getting away from the building to make a bank deposit. The haven can also be a fantasy place like the middle of a juicy book or your favorite magazine. You can plan or recall the best parts of your vacation. Some teachers I know escape by watching their favorite soap opera during their lunch hour. Even a few minutes in your particular haven may leave you more relaxed and ready to make better decisions.

6. Give yourself the opportunity for regular exercise. Exercise can drain away the tensions of the "fight or flight" response (Roth and Holmes, 1985),(Yager and Hubert, 1979). Regular exercisers report feeling both relaxed mentally and energized physically as a result. There is some evidence exercise can even help aleviate symptoms of depression.

7. Examine your sense of perspective. Could you sometimes be fretting about things that aren't really that important? Does your blood pressure go up 20 points because some kid didn't take his hat off in the building? Are you sent up the walls because the toilet paper is always hung the "wrong way" in the restrooms? Perhaps you could remove some stress from you life by

adopting the motto "Don't sweat the small stuff" and by recognizing unimportant things for what the are - "un"important. Keeping a sense of perspective means recognizing that while educators do vitally important work, it is generally not "life or death" riding on every decision. A month from now, a year from now, fifty years from now will anyone really care that you made a mistake?

8. Decide to be at least as tolerant, encouraging, and non-judgemental of yourself as you are of your students and faculty. The one type of stress we have the most control over is that which we place ourselves under. Reduce it!

9. Where did the phrase "Don't put all your eggs in one basket" come from? Perhaps it came from some wise principal who realized that when things at school weren't going too smoothly it was really nice to have satisfying hobbies, family events and social activities to turn to. Do you have activities apart from school which you can throw yourself into and forget the cares of the day? Why not?

10. If you have had an especially stressful time at school you might consider giving yourself a chance to unwind before facing a new set of responsibilities at home. Stop for a walk through the park. Treat yourself to an ice cream cone. Shop for that item you've been itching to buy. See a movie. Join that exercise group that meets three afternoons a week.

11. Tell your family (and friends) how they can support you. If you need a few minutes to relax and recuperate when you first get home - ask for it. When you treat yourself well and ask for what you need you serve as a model for others in your family to ask for the support they need too.

(Bandura and McDonald, 1963), (Mischel and Liebert, 1966).

12. If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you...", Kipling said you would "...be a Man...". I suggest that "If you can find your sense of humor when all about you have lost theirs" you'll avoid the ulcers and other psychophysiological problems taking yourself too seriously can bring. (Cohen, 1977).

13. Finally, if you've tried everything and still experience uncomfortable amounts of stress in your work - consider finding other work. Not everyone is designed to be an air traffic controller, commodities trader, or school principal. You might be wildly successful and a whole lot happier in another position.

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